

Mu-kelengu, Tab.51, Volume 8 of Van Rheedee's *Hortus Malabaricus* (1688)

K. S. Manilal

Centre for Research in Indigenous Knowledge, Science and Culture
D-37, Jawahar Nagar, Calicut 673 006, Kerala, India.
E-mail: manilalks@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Mu-kelengu of Tab. 51 of Volume 8 of Van Rheedee's *Hortus Malabaricus* is identified as *Dioscorea esculenta* (Lour.) Burkill. Latin text pertaining to this species is rendered in English. Its interpretation, annotations and original illustration are provided.

Keywords: *Mu-kelengu*, *Dioscorea esculenta*, *Hortus Malabaricus*

Introduction

Hortus Malabaricus is the first and the most comprehensive work on the plant wealth of Malabar and South East Asia (Van Rheedee, 1678-1693). This 12-volume treatise in Latin published from Amsterdam was compiled by the then Dutch Governor of Cochin, H.A. Van Rheedee. About 742 plants are described and illustrated in this work under their Malayalam (local language of Malabar) names. This pre-Linnaean publication, massive in its size and contents, made quite a stir among European scholars as it opened up a new plant world before them. Though a complete set of *Hortus Malabaricus* was not available to Linnaeus at the time of preparation of his *Species Plantarum*, he was forthright in admitting his dependence and trust on Rheedee's depictions. There had been many attempts to translate the complete work into English and to determine the botanical identity of all the plants mentioned in it, but none fully succeeded (Hill, 1774; Van Poot, 1689; Dennstedt, 1818; Hamilton, 1822-1835; Dillwyn, 1839; Hasskarl, 1861, 1862, 1867).

Mu-kelengu of Tab. 51 of Volume 8, originally published in 1688, is identified here as *Dioscorea esculenta* (Lour.) Burkill. As no other English versions of the original Latin text of this species, its interpretation and annotations have ever been published, they are provided along with its original illustration.

This English version is a word-by-word translation of the original Latin text. No attempt has been made to modify or correct it to conform to the modern style of description or treatment, so that the reader will get an idea about its original version.

Mu-kelengu

Fig. 51.

Mu-kelengu, according to the Brahmins *Neya*; Portuguese *Inhame do Cao*; Belgian *Hondswortel*; grows around Cochin, Mutan and in other places, always green, flowering during the rainy season, without fruits.

Root thick, flesh burning, but when cooked sheds the burning (the pungency) and is eaten by natives. Stalk-lets are round, downy, light-green, with a dark-green glabrous bark underneath the downy coating.

The leaves have the shape of heart, anteriorly contracted into a thick and rigid tip, are slender, soft, downy of light and bright greenness namely on the lower side; on the upper, plain, glabrous and of dark and shining greenness: devoid of any smell and taste. The mid-rib with its lateral ones stand out on the side.

Flowers are serially attached on petioles, five or six petalled, with a more broad and deeper mouth,

Fig. 1

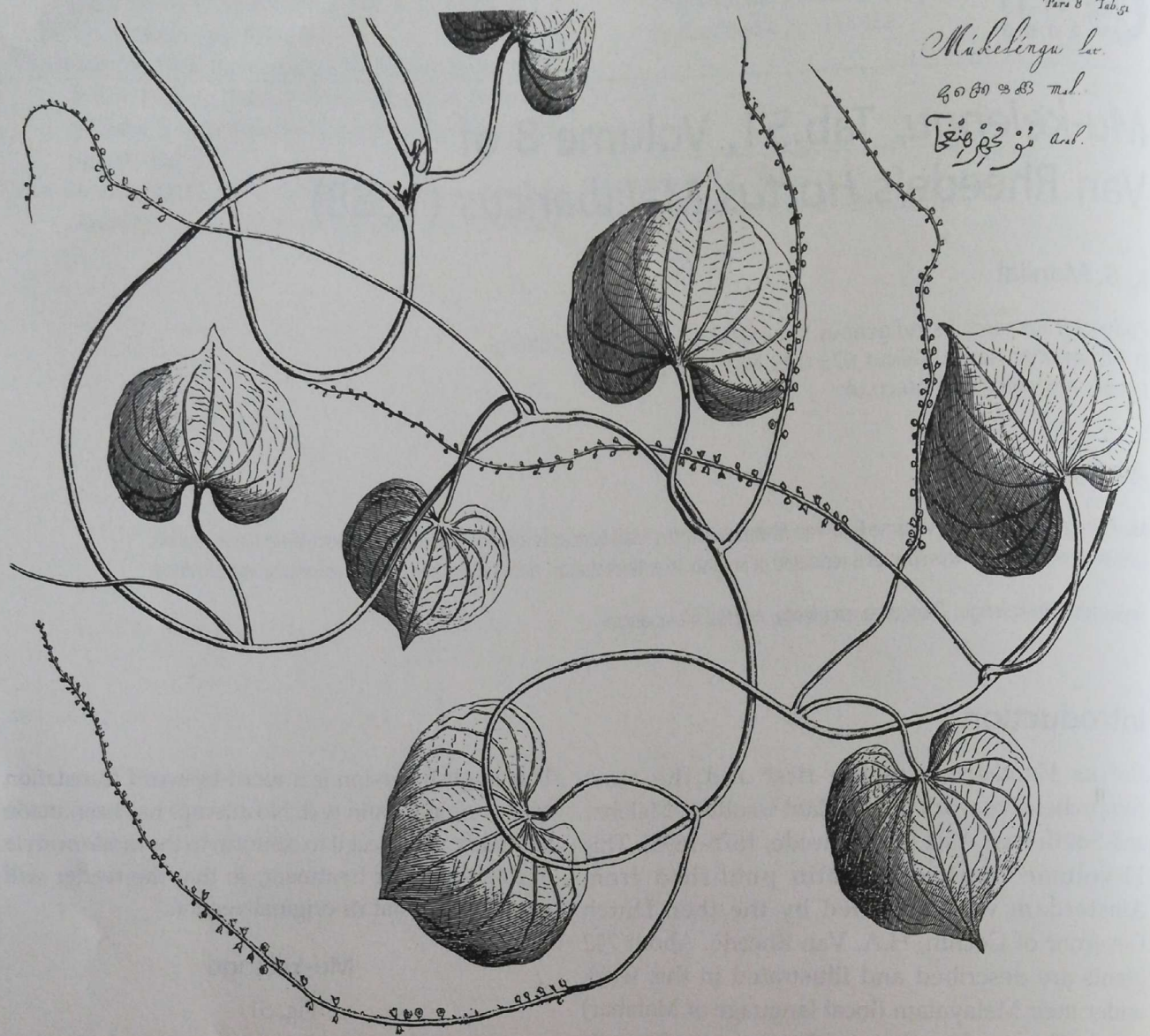


Figure 1. Mu-kelengu of Rheede appeared as in t.51 Vol.8 of Hortus Malabaricus

from which stand out five or six stamens according to the number of petals, which (stamens) are provided with yellow apices, in the centre they contain a green globule, are clasped (received) by a small, downy calyx. Flower buds round, downy: of no smell.

(Its Uses)

The leaves crushed in a decoction of rice, cure abscesses.

The first ever English translation of Van Rheede's *Hortus Malabaricus* with modern binomial nomenclature of all the plants mentioned in the work

was published recently as *Van Rheede's Hortus Malabaricus English Edition with Annotations and Modern Botanical Nomenclature* (Manilal, 2003). The 742 plants described by Van Rheede under different Malayalam names are found belonging to 691 species acceptable under the rules of ICBN. The new addition contains the English version of the Latin text, annotations and original illustrations of all the plants in 12 volumes. The volume-wise Indices and the general Indices carried all the names contained in the work including *Dioscorea esculenta* (Lour.) Burkill. However, the English version of the Latin text and the illustration pertaining to *Dioscorea esculenta* could not be included in the English edition due to an

Dioscorea esculenta (Lour.) Burkill, Gard. Bull. Straits Settl. 1: 396. 1917; Burkill in Fl. Males. I, 4: 307. 1951. *Dioscorea sativa* sensu L., Sp. Pl. 1033 as to Rheede citation, not as to lectotype. *Oncus esculentus* Lour., Fl. Cochinch. 194.1790 [DIOSCOREACEAE].

Mu-kelengu Rheede, Hort. Malab. 8: 97, t. 51. 1688.

The name Mukkezhengu (Malayalam script on t. 51) is still used; "mu" is prefixed in the sense of "before, in front, or chief" (the allusion here is not clear); and kezhen-gu refers to tuber. Now it is also called Pidikezhengu (pidi means a handful, reference to size) and Pullenkezhengu (pullu means grass, reference to rootlets). It is cultivated as a vegetable in Malabar.

The places of occurrence mentioned are Cochin, of the same name now also; and Mutan, which is Muttom, the region south of Cochin, beyond Aroor.

oversight. Hence, these are provided here as was done in case of all other species included in the new edition.

Literature Cited

Dennstaedt, A.W. 1818. Schlüssel zum *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*. Weimar (Landes-Industrie-Comptoir).

Dillwyn, L.W. 1839. A review of the References to the *Hortus Malabaricus*. Swansea.

Hamilton, F. 1822-1835. A commentary on *Hortus Malabaricus*. *Trans. Linn. Soc. London* **13** (1822): 474-560; **14** (1824): 171-312; **15** (1825): 78-152; **17** (1835): 147-252.

Hasskarl, J.C. 1861. Horti Malabarici clavis nova. *Flora* **44**:401-408; 481-488; 545-552; 577-584; 609-616; 641-648; 705-712; 737-745.

Hasskarl, J.C. 1862. Horti Malabarici clavis nova. *Flora* **45**:41-48; 73-80; 121-128; 153-160; 187-192.

Hasskarl, 1867. Horti Malabarici Rheedeani clavis. Druck von E. Blochmann and Sohn. Dresden.

Hill, J. 1774. Horti malabarici pars prima. London.

Manilal, K.S. 2003. *Van Rheede's Hortus Malabaricus English Edition: with Annotations and Modern Botanical Nomenclature*. 12 Vols. University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram.

Van Poot, A. 1689. *Malabarse Kruidhof*. 2 Vols. Amsterdam.

Van Rheede, H.A. 1678-1693. *Hortus Malabaricus*. 12 Vols. Amsterdam.

Received : 3.2.2005

Revised and accepted : 15.6.2005